

# Hepatitis C Do You Know a Veteran Who Has Tested Positive for Hepatitis C?

## **What is hepatitis C?**

Hepatitis C is a disease that affects someone's liver. The hepatitis C virus (HCV) causes hepatitis C. You can get hepatitis C by having contact with the blood of a person who already has it.

## **How is hepatitis C different from hepatitis A and hepatitis B?**

Hepatitis is a medical term meaning swelling (or *inflammation*) of the liver. Hepatitis A, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C are caused by different viruses and are spread in different ways:

### ◆ **Hepatitis A**

Hepatitis A is a disease caused by the *hepatitis A virus* or *HAV* for short. Hepatitis A is usually spread through dirty food and water. Most people recover from hepatitis A without any problems. You can get a vaccine to prevent you from getting hepatitis A. Talk with your VA doctor if you think you are at risk for hepatitis A.

### ◆ **Hepatitis B**

Hepatitis B is a disease caused by the *hepatitis B virus* or *HBV* for short. Hepatitis B is usually spread through semen, vaginal fluids, and blood. You can get hepatitis B by having sex with someone who is infected or by sharing needles and works



to inject drugs. Most people who get hepatitis B recover, but for some people it may turn into a lifelong (or *chronic*) infection. You can get a vaccine to prevent you from getting hepatitis B. Talk with your VA doctor if you think you are at risk for hepatitis B.

## **How do people get hepatitis C?**

Hepatitis C is a disease caused by the *hepatitis C virus* or *HCV* for short. Some of the ways people get hepatitis C include

- getting a blood transfusion or organ transplant before 1992;
- injecting illegal drugs, such as heroin or cocaine, even if it's only once;
- being on a kidney machine (or *kidney dialysis*) for a long time;
- being exposed to hepatitis C on the job, such as a health care worker who was stuck by a needle;
- being born to a woman who had hepatitis C when she gave birth to you.

## **Will someone with hepatitis C feel sick?**

No, not always. The symptoms of hepatitis C are often very mild. Some people have no symptoms at all. Even though someone does not have symptoms, it is still a serious illness. In most cases, once a person has hepatitis C, it never goes away. Because it stays in someone's body, hepatitis C can be spread to other people even if there are no symptoms.

### ***How can I protect myself from getting hepatitis C?***

The most important thing you can do to protect yourself from getting hepatitis C is to stay away from other people's blood and things that might have other people's blood on them. Here are some suggestions:

- ◆ **Do not share needles to inject drugs**  
If you feel that you are ready to stop using drugs, call or visit your VA medical center. VA has programs to help you. If you can't stop, do not share needles, cookers, or any other drug-use equipment.
- ◆ **Practice safe sex**  
Use condoms (or *rubbers*) correctly every time you have sex.
- ◆ **Don't share personal items that might have blood on them**  
This includes things like razors, toothbrushes, or personal medical supplies.
- ◆ **Talk with your VA doctor about hepatitis C**

### ***Can I get hepatitis C from working in the same office with someone who has hepatitis C?***

No, hepatitis C is only spread through contact with blood. You **CANNOT** get hepatitis C by

- hugging someone with hepatitis C
- eating dirty food or drinking dirty water
- sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses
- donating blood

### ***Will someone know exactly when he or she got the hepatitis C virus?***

Usually not. People can sometimes guess when or where they had contact with someone else's blood. Since many people do not have symptoms of hepatitis C right away, it is hard to be sure when the infection started or where it came from. We often tell patients not to think so much about how and when they were infected, but rather, how to best take care of themselves now.

### ***Is there a test for hepatitis C?***

Yes, the *hepatitis C antibody test*. When your body finds a new virus in your blood, it makes a special antibody to help you fight that virus. So, if you have the hepatitis C antibody in your blood, it means that the hepatitis C virus has been in your blood.

Doctors can test for this antibody by taking a small sample of blood. Usually, you can find out the results in one to two weeks. If the antibody test is positive, it can mean one of three things: You may have the virus in your blood now, you may have had it and then cleared it from your blood, or there's a small chance that the test was wrong. Your doctor will do more tests to see which of these is true.

### ***Is there a vaccine to prevent hepatitis C?***

No. There is no vaccine yet to prevent hepatitis C.

***Will having hepatitis C prevent me from getting treated for HIV?***

No. But some HIV treatments can damage your liver, so your doctor may want you to try others.

***Will having HIV prevent me from getting treated for hepatitis C?***

No. But if you have HIV, you might experience worse side effects or other problems when you take medicines for hepatitis C.

***What else can I do if I have HIV and hepatitis C co-infection?***

Having HIV or hepatitis C alone is difficult enough. Finding out that you have both at the same time might seem overwhelming. Here are some things that can help:

**~ Respect your body.**

Eat healthy food, drink plenty of water, and get restful sleep. Try to exercise every day.

**~ Don't use drugs, drink alcohol, or have unsafe sex.**

Remember that drugs and alcohol can make your illness worse. Having unsafe sex can give HIV and hepatitis C to others. Talk with your doctor if you can't stop drinking, taking drugs, or having unsafe sex.

**~ Get support.**

Ask your doctor where you can get support in your area. If you already get services from an AIDS organization, ask about support groups for people who have HIV and hepatitis C.

**~ Stay informed.**

HIV and hepatitis C are two of the most important medical issues today. Try to educate yourself about them. Ask your doctor if you need help making sense of anything you hear on the news or read in the newspaper.

**~ Follow your doctor's advice.**

Follow all instructions you get from your doctor. Try to keep all of your appointments. Call your doctor immediately if you have any problems.

***Who can I contact for more information?***

Call your local VA medical center and visit the Veterans Affairs Hepatitis C Web site at <http://www.hepatitis.va.gov/>

For more information on hepatitis, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Web site at: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis>

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